

BOOK REVIEW

The victorious counterrevolution: the nationalist effort in the Spanish Civil War, by Michael Seidman, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, 352 + xiii pp., ISBN 978-0-2992-4964-9

Why would anyone want to write, let alone read, yet another book on the Spanish Civil War? Michael Seidman's justification is double. *The Victorious Counterrevolution*, he claims, provides a more thorough *material* explanation for Franco's victory; and it places this explanation in a new *comparative* framework, evaluating Franco's success in light of the failures of fellow 'counterrevolutionary' forces in the Russian and Chinese Civil Wars. Seidman aims to show that the Nationalists did a better job than the Republicans when it came to 'avoiding inflation, collecting taxes, providing food, encouraging healthy animal husbandry, and offering efficient government services' (12). The underlying assumption is that, for the majority of people, physical needs and desires are prone to trump political and ideological aspirations any day. With reference to the much-discussed role of Franco's North-African mercenaries, for instance, Seidman argues that '[s]upplying beverages, food and sex may have been more important to the continued Moorish participation on the Nationalist side than – as so many historians have argued – promising Morocco independence' (44). Seidman chides his fellow historians for a chronic underestimation of individualism and opportunism as factors determining individual human behavior and collective historical processes (208).

Seidman's first chapter covers the lead-up to the outbreak and the military history of the war. The second covers the management of agriculture and harvests, wheat and bread, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, the raising and distribution of funds, transportation, the postal service and public health. Chapter three analyzes Catholic neotraditionalism as 'an energetic reaction to the revolutionary challenge' that worked as a galvanizing force on the Franco side. Chapter four covers the ways in which individuals on the Nationalist side defied the authorities – a defiance that, in Seidman's view, paved the way for the later transformation of 'the authoritarian political economy that [the Francoist state] had mandated during the civil war' into 'a more market- and consumer-oriented one' (11). Similarly, his *Republic of Egos* (2002) established a link between post-Franco Spanish consumerism and the war-time egotistic desire for self-preservation among the general population, which, Seidman claimed, overruled ideology or political commitment in most cases.

While framing his work as a new contribution to the field, Seidman also suggests that it marks a return to what he sees as true history – 'unearthing new evidence that challenges old interpretations and helps to destroy myths' – after a period dominated by explanations that focused on 'memory and postwar representations of the conflict' and 'collective symbols and discourses,' which, Seidman thinks, tended to

overemphasize individuals' 'accommodation to group identities' (11–12). It is good to be reminded of the importance of rigorous archival work and primary sources – especially now that so many are available online. But Seidman overrates the novelty of his approach. The best cultural history is at least as materially grounded as his own work; and the central aspects of his analysis – including the chronic tension between political commitment and the need for survival – have long been equally central in novels, documentaries and feature films about the civil war, as well as oral histories such as the seminal *Blood of Spain* by the late Ronald Fraser. This poses a larger question: whether it makes any intellectual sense to radically distinguish, as Seidman does, between individual interests and collective identities; or between language, culture and politics on the one hand, and physical needs on the other. As Michael Richards wrote about *The Republic of Egos*, much of what Seidman identifies as 'selfish' behavior 'only makes sense . . . when situated within given social surroundings and relationships.'

A deeper problem with Seidman's neopositivist rejection of cultural studies is that he dispenses with theory altogether, and does not stop to consider the implications of his own approach. In fact, his comparative framework comes ideologically preloaded, premised as it is on a fundamental analogy between, on the one hand, the 'counterrevolutionary' Russian Whites, Chinese Nationalists, and Francoists and on the other, the 'revolutionary' Bolsheviks, Chinese Communists, and Spanish Republicans. His adoption of these central identifiers leads him to assume as foregone conclusions scenarios that are, in fact, quite disputable: for example, that a victory of Franco's 'revolutionary foe' (i.e., the Republic) would have resulted in the establishment of a revolutionary regime – rather than, say, a parliamentary democracy (7). The fact that the Spanish army was not weakened by World War I, Seidman writes, 'may have prevented [Spain] from following the Soviet example' (7). This is only marginally different from the claim that if it had not been for the military rebellion of July 1936, Spain would have fallen prey to Communism – a key element in Franco's justification of the coup, and one that has been amply discredited (Viñas, Preston, Graham). A similar slant is evident in Seidman's claim that 'Communist, Socialist, and anarchist activists and militiamen prevented the successful execution of a relatively peaceful pronunciamiento in the tradition of the nineteenth or early twentieth century' (25). By effectively laying the blame for the war at the feet of those who defended the government, Seidman echoes the perverse logic of Franco's 1939 *Ley de responsabilidades políticas*. The historical evidence suggests, meanwhile, that the physical elimination of the ideological enemy was part of the plan all along.

Seidman's reluctance to invoke conventional social-scientific categories for classifying groups leads to strangely unrigorous assertions. 'Few of the common folk,' he writes for example, 'had any ideological commitment and just wanted to be left alone' (26). The chapter on neotraditionalism invokes '[t]he venerable Spanish antagonism to secularization,' identifying anticlericalism as 'a factor of division' and the Nationalists' Catholicism as 'a common denominator that rallied many small and medium landowners in rural Spain who were disgusted with Republican attacks against the church' (159). In practice, it is just as legitimate to speak of 'the venerable Spanish antagonism to the Catholic hierarchy'; and, depending on the context, Catholicism and anticlericalism were both factors of division and unification.

A related problem is the relative importance that Seidman assigns, in his explanation of the Nationalists' success, to the latter's violent repression of dissent. His book, he announces in the introduction, 'does not analyze at any great length the Nationalist repression of tens of thousands of its enemies,' not only because this aspect has 'received excellent coverage from other historians', but because 'the recent historiographical concentration on repression [...] has hidden the ability of the franquistas to supply their military and civilian populations during wartime' and 'continues the political orientation of Spanish civil war historiography and fosters the consequent neglect of social and economic issues' (12, 79). However, if there was one element of central importance to the Nationalists' 'exceptional performance', it was precisely their policy of systematic repression. Seidman's own analysis bears this out: If '[t]he ability of the Spanish Nationalists to control their rear was decisive in their victory,' he writes, it was in large part because they managed to 'impose a puritanically terrorist order on the population' (29–30). Yet the bracketing of repression gives rise to awkward narrative moments, as when Seidman is forced to admit that the soup kitchens established by Queipo de Llano – whom he portrays as an able administrator particularly adept at collecting funds, keeping order, and maintaining morale – fed 'thousands of the poor, including – perversely enough – the widows and children of the breadwinners whom his forces had eliminated' (125). Seidman states that Queipo de Llano's success in the South was due to his 'fund-raising efforts' and 'his leadership of a bourgeois social movement that was willing to make significant material sacrifices to defeat the left' (117). It is clear, however, that the fund-raising, leadership and 'sacrifices' were actually embedded in a coercive structure: 'Those who refused to donate "voluntarily" were labeled "Jews" and subjected to small and large fines tailored to their means,' and Queipo established a 'system of informers to seek information on those who refused to donate to the cause' (120–21).

At times, Seidman gets carried away. In the chapter on the outbreak of the war, he writes improbably that the 'Insurgents' individual reputations for valor, courage, and efficiency – Emilio Mola, José Millán Astray, Gonzalo Queipo de Llano, José Enrique Varela, Luis Orgaz, Sanjurjo and ultimately Franco – provided a model and a mystique for their troops that their Republican enemies completely lacked' (25) What about Miaja, Lister, Durruti, El Campesino, Vicente Rojo or Pasionaria? Seidman's explanation of the economic and military backing that Franco received from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy is quite unusual: 'The considerable financial support of Germany and especially Italy can be seen as a variety of "matching grants" common in American philanthropy, whereby large donors match the sums of small donors who demonstrate to the former that the more modest contributors are dedicated to the cause both emotionally and financially' (122). And Seidman proffers some curious counterfactual speculation. 'As they gained territory,' he writes, 'the Nationalists had an unprecedented opportunity to exact revenge on their enemies, even if it cannot be ruled out that the Republicans might have engaged in a slaughter of a similar order of magnitude had they won' (172). 'Many historians have argued that the Western democracies "betrayed" the Spanish Republic by refusing to assist it sufficiently,' he asserts elsewhere; but '[p]erhaps [...] Republicans would have wasted the assistance of the Western allies and lost the war' (125). That scenario, Seidman argues, would have weakened the position of the factions among the great democratic powers calling for collective security, strengthened the appeasers, and

ultimately made possible a fascist victory in World War II (124–25, 254). Franco's victory, then, did not just save Spain from Communism: It may well have saved Europe from fascism.

In the field of Spanish Civil War historiography, which continues to flourish in Spain and elsewhere, Seidman's work is something of an outlier – and not only because what he presents as an innovative methodology carries with it a set of assumptions that harken back to outdated explanatory frameworks. While the majority of recent scholarship has led to a more *complex* understanding of the war, the tendency of Seidman's work is, in the end, reductive.

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